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Schoch, Simone ; Nikitin, Jana ; Freund, Alexandra M

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-015-9482-1

Why Do(n't) You Like Me? The Role of Social Approach and Avoidance Motives in Attributions Following Social Acceptance and Rejection

Simone Schoch[1], Jana Nikitin[1], & Alexandra M. Freund[1,2]

[1]University of Zurich, Department of Psychology, [2] University Research Priority Program Dynamics of Healthy Aging

Author Note

This research was supported by Grant 100014_126868/1 (Project „Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation – The Role of Age") from the Swiss National Science Foundation (PIs: Jana Nikitin and Alexandra M. Freund). We thank the Life-Management team for helpful discussions of the work reported in this article, and Mirjam Dönni, Christian Gross, and Mahmoud Hemmo for their help with data collection.

Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Simone Schoch, who is now at the Zurich University of Teacher Education, Lagerstrasse 2, 8090 Zürich, Switzerland; Jana Nikitin, Department of Psychology, University of Zurich, Binzmuehlestrasse 14/11, 8050 Zurich, Switzerland; or Alexandra M. Freund, Department of Psychology and University Research Priority Program Dynamics of Healthy Aging, University of Zurich, Binzmuehlestrasse 14/11, 8050 Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: s.schoch@phzh.ch; nikitin@psychologie.uzh.ch; freund@psychologie.uzh.ch.

Abstract

The present research aimed to answer the question of why people differ in their way of attributing experienced social acceptance and rejection. Using a motivational approach, two scenario studies (Study 1, $N = 280$; Study 2, $N = 232$) and one study using actual social interactions (Study 3, $N = 128$) supported our hypothesis that dispositional social approach motives are associated with attributions following social acceptance ($\beta = .16 – .23$, $p < .001$), but not social rejection ($\beta = -.03 – -.06$, $p > .13$), whereas dispositional social avoidance motives are associated with attributions following social rejection ($\beta = .23 – .29$, $p < .001$), but not social acceptance ($\beta = .-.02 – -.08$, $p > .07$). These studies thus demonstrate that social approach and avoidance motives are differentially predictive in social situations with positive compared to negative outcomes. Moreover, social motives play an important role in people's attributions following their experiences of social acceptance or rejection. Taken together, the three studies suggest that people's explanations of social acceptance and rejection differ as a function of what they generally want and fear in social interactions.

Keywords: Social motives; approach; avoidance; attribution; social interactions

Why Do(n't) You Like Me? The Role of Social Approach and Avoidance Motives in Attributions Following Social Acceptance or Rejection

Belonging is a central human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), so people are generally highly motivated to experience satisfying social interactions (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gable & Impett, 2012). The motivation to belong can be oriented towards approaching positive social outcomes, such as acceptance and intimacy (i.e., social approach motivation), or towards avoiding negative social outcomes, such as rejection and loneliness (i.e., social avoidance motivation; McClelland, 1985; Mehrabian, 1970). However, people cannot always attain positive and avoid negative social outcomes. In other words, all of us experience–to varying degrees–social acceptance and rejection.

When people experience social acceptance, they might attribute this social success to internal causes such as their social graces or likeability. In contrast, when they feel rejected, they might attribute this failure to external causes such as the interaction partner's bad mood. The question of how people attribute social acceptance and rejection is at the core of this article. We hypothesize that social approach and avoidance motivation predict whether social acceptance and rejection are attributed to internal, stable, and global or external variable, and specific causes (i.e., that what people want and fear affects their interpretation of the causes of positive and negative social outcomes).

The Role of Social Approach and Avoidance Motives in Attributions

Attribution patterns are characteristic ways of explaining positive and negative outcomes in terms of three dimensions: Internality, stability, and globality (Heider, 1958; Peterson & Buchanan, 1995; Weiner et al., 1987). *Internality* refers to whether the cause of an outcome is located internally (i.e., within the person) or externally (i.e., in the situation or other people). *Stability* refers to whether the cause of an outcome is seen as relatively temporary (variable) or

permanent and unchanging (stable). *Globality* refers to whether the cause of an outcome is specific to the given situation (specific) or holds across various situations (global).

Stability and globality are highly correlated and difficult to differentiate, both empirically and theoretically, as both dimensions refer to the probability of an event across situations and over time. Therefore, these two dimensions are often combined into a single dimension, *generality*, which refers to whether the cause of social acceptance or rejection is seen as temporary and specific to the given situation or as stable across situations and over time (e.g., Metalsky, Halberstadt, & Abramson, 1987; Stiensmeier-Pelster, 1989). We will thus focus on the dimensions of internality and generality here.

What causes do people attribute positive social outcomes (i.e., being liked) and negative social outcomes (i.e., being rejected) to? Why do people's causal attributions differ? A person's expectations about whether social situations generally have positive or negative outcomes are particularly relevant for the factors to which they attribute the social outcomes they experience (Feather, 1969; Feather & Simon, 1971; Morris, 2007). A person's generalized expectations, in turn, are key to understanding dispositional social approach and avoidance motives (Mehrabian, 1994).

Social approach motives are characterized by generalized expectations of positive social situations (e.g., "I can behave in a way that results in others liking me," or "Social situations are mostly positive") that people want to approach. Based on previous research in the achievement domain (Feather, 1969; Feather & Simon, 1971), we expect that if these positive expectations are fulfilled and positive outcomes (such as acceptance) actually occur, people are more likely to attribute them to internal (vs. external) and general (vs. variable-specific) causes. In doing so, people attempt to maintain a consistent sense of themselves and the world. Causal attributions thereby operate as a self-verification process (Alden, 1986).

Social avoidance motives, in turn, are characterized by generalized expectations of negative social situations (e.g., "I cannot behave in a way that results in others liking me," or "Social situations are mostly negative") that people try to avoid. Consequently, when the negative outcomes occur that people with strong social avoidance motives generally expect and try to avoid, they are likely to attribute them to internal (vs. external) and general (vs. variable-specific) causes. Again, these causal attributions reinforce a consistent sense of themselves and the world, even if that sense is negative (Alden, 1986). Taken together, the difference in people's strength of their dispositional social motives should provide an answer for why they differ in their causal attributions of positive and negative social outcomes.

Note, that social approach and avoidance motives are proposed to be two largely independent and separate motivational systems, that operate simultaneously and influence social behavior, cognition and experience through different processes (e.g., Gable & Berkman, 2008; Gable, 2006; Nikitin & Freund, 2008, 2010). More specifically, the literature on social approach and avoidance motivation suggests that approach motives are particularly relevant in guiding thought and behavior in positive social situations and avoidance motives in negative social situations (e.g., Nikitin, Burgermeister, & Freund, 2012; Strachman & Gable, 2006). Accordingly, avoidance motives are associated with a heightened sensitivity to negative information, whereas approach motives are related to a heightened sensitivity to positive information, but not vice versa (e.g., Derryberry & Reed, 1994; Gomez & Gomez, 2002; Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992; Strachman & Gable, 2006). For example, Gable and Poore (2008) investigated what information people base their evaluation of relationship satisfaction on. They found that people with strong social approach motives based their evaluation on the presence or absence of positive information, whereas people with strong social avoidance motives based their evaluation on the presence or absence of negative information. Similarly, Romero-Canyas and

Downey (2012) showed that social avoidance motives predicted negative (but not positive) feelings towards a potential dating partner. Strachman and Gable (2006) demonstrated that social approach motives were associated with positive social outcomes (e.g., social life satisfaction), but not negative social outcomes. Thus, we expect that social approach motives are unrelated to attributions following negative social outcomes and that social avoidance motives are unrelated to attributions following positive social outcomes. This should be the case, because social approach motives are particularly predictive of cognition in positive social situations (but not in negative social situations), whereas social avoidance motives are particularly predictive of cognition in negative social situations (but not in positive social situations).

In sum, we hypothesize that:

(1) Social approach motives are positively associated with the attribution of social acceptance to internal and general (i.e., stable, global) causes

(2) social avoidance motives are positively associated with the attribution of social rejection to internal and general (i.e., stable, global) causes.

The Present Studies

Three studies tested these hypotheses. Using a multi-method approach, we used hypothetical scenarios of social interactions as well as an actual social interaction that involved either social acceptance or rejection. All three studies were approved by the local ethics committee.

Study 1

Study 1 used four brief hypothetical scenarios involving either social acceptance or rejection to investigate whether social approach and avoidance motives are related to attributions following social acceptance and rejection, respectively. All four scenarios were presented to each participant. The scenarios as well as all items included in the study were always presented in the

same order. The participants gave written informed consent before and were fully debriefed after participation.

Method

Participants. The participants were recruited using flyers, advertisements in student mailing lists, and in senior citizen clubs. The participants completed self-report measures at home (either via online on www.soscisurvey.de or paper-and-pencil versions of the measures). The sample consisted of $N = 280$ participants (40% men, age range 16-84 years, $M = 41.83$, $SD = 22.43$).[1] They received the equivalent of $7.50 USD in Swiss currency as compensation.

Social approach and avoidance motives. We used the German version of the Mehrabian Affiliative Tendency (MAFF) and the Mehrabian Sensitivity to Rejection (MSR) Scales to assess social approach and avoidance motives (Mehrabian, 1970; German version: Sokolowski, 1986). The MAFF consists of 25 items assessing social approach motives (e.g., "I like to make as many friends as I can") and the MSR consists of 25 items assessing social avoidance motives (e.g., "I am very sensitive to any signs that a person might not want to talk to me"). The MAFF and the MSR Scales are commonly used to assess dispositional social approach and avoidance motives and have good reliability and validity (e.g., Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2003; Nikitin, Burgermeister, & Freund, 2012; Strachman & Gable, 2006). The response scales ranged from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The descriptive statistics and internal consistencies of all scales of Study 1 are reported in Table 1.

Scenarios of social acceptance and rejection. To induce social acceptance and rejection, each participant read four brief scenarios of social situations. Two scenarios described situations involving social acceptance (e.g., "You meet a person that you do not know well. This person gives you a compliment.") and two described situations involving social rejection (e.g.,

"You meet someone for the first time. This person rebuffs you."). The acceptance and rejection scenarios were presented alternating, one at a time.[2]

Attributions. We used an adapted version of the Attributional Pattern Questionnaire for Adults (affiliation subscale; Poppe, Stiensmeier-Pelster, & Pelster, 2005) to assess to what causes the participants attributed social acceptance and rejection. After reading each scenario, the participants wrote down the main reason for their success or failure in the scenario. Then, they indicated the perceived cause of the outcome along the dimensions of internality ("The cause lies in the circumstances or other individuals" vs. "The cause lies in me"), stability ("The cause will change over time" vs. "The cause will remain stable over time"), and globality ("The cause only applies to this situation" vs. "The cause applies to many other situations"). Each dimension was assessed with two items. The response scales ranged from -3 (*external, variable, specific*, respectively) to +3 (*internal, stable, global*, respectively). The dimension of generality was indexed by the mean of the stability and globality dimensions.

Participants were asked to write down the main reason for the perceived success or failure. This is done so that they have their main reason in mind when evaluating the attribution dimensions. However, we held no hypotheses regarding the specific reasons participants provide for the given situation, and they were no further analyzed.

Preliminary analyses

Age differences. Independent-samples *t*-Tests revealed no significant age differences in social approach motives, attributions following acceptance to internal causes, and attributions following rejection to internal and general causes (all *p*s > .17). Significant age differences were found for social avoidance motives (young: $M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.71$; old: $M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.73$; $t[275] = 2.76$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.33$) and attributions of acceptance to general causes (young: $M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.98$; old: $M = 1.01$, $SD = 0.95$; $t[275] = -2.38$, $p < .05$, $d = -0.29$).

Sex differences. Independent-samples *t*-Tests showed no significant differences between men and women in social approach and avoidance motives, attributions following acceptance to internal and general causes as well as attributions following rejection to general causes (all *p*s > .14). The only difference was found for attributions following rejection to internal causes (men: $M = -0.02$, $SD = 1.22$; women: $M = 0.79$, $SD = 0.96$; $t[275] = -2.13$, $p < .05$, $d = -0.26$).

Results

We ran regression analyses predicting the attribution to different causes of social acceptance and rejection from approach and avoidance motives (see Table 2). As expected, social approach motives predicted attribution following social acceptance, and social avoidance motives predicted attribution following social rejection. Social approach motives were positively associated with the attribution of social acceptance to general causes ($\beta = .21$, $p < .01$), while social avoidance motives were positively related to the attribution of social rejection to general ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) and internal causes ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$). There were two unexpected findings. First, social avoidance motives predicted the attribution of social acceptance to general causes ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .05$). Second, social approach motives did not predict the attribution of social acceptance to internal causes ($\beta = .10$, $p > .10$). These results did not substantially differ when controlling for age and sex. In addition, neither age nor sex moderated the relationship between social motives and attributions following social acceptance and rejection. The results of Study 1 will be discussed in the General Discussion below.[3]

Study 2

In Study 2, we again used scenarios involving hypothetical social situations. The scenarios consisted of a hypothetical interaction with an unfamiliar person that either showed interest (i.e., social acceptance) or no interest (i.e., social rejection) in the participant. Unlike

Study 1, Study 2 used a between-subjects design. Participants either read a scenario involving social acceptance or one involving social rejection.

Method

Participants. The participants were recruited from the participant pool of our laboratory and via online platforms of various Swiss universities. Seventeen participants' data were excluded from analysis because they failed to respond correctly to at least one of two control questions (see below for detailed information). The definitive sample consisted of $N = 232$ participants (20% men; age range 18-33 years, $M = 23.55$, $SD = 3.07$). Men and women did not significantly differ in any of the study variables (all ps > .28).

Procedure. The participants completed the questionnaire online (run on www.soscisurvey.de). They filled out a questionnaire assessing social approach and avoidance motives. Then they read a scenario involving either social acceptance or social rejection and were asked to think about how they would feel and react in the given situation. The objective of this instruction was to allow us to acquire data about the experience of social acceptance or rejection, respectively, mimicking closely an actual social acceptance or rejection situation. Using a manipulation check, we tested whether the scenarios induced feelings of social acceptance and rejection, respectively. The participants also indicated the perceived cause of the outcome (social acceptance or rejection) along the dimensions of generality (stability, globality) and internality. All the items included in the online questionnaire were presented in the same order to every participant. A subsample ($n = 99$) also participated in an unrelated study in the laboratory and received the equivalent of $27 USD in Swiss currency as compensation. The participants who only completed the online questionnaire were invited to take part in a lottery drawing of ten gift certificates worth approximately $10 USD each.

Social approach and avoidance motives. As in Study 1, we used the MAFF and the MSR Scales (Mehrabian, 1970; German version: Sokolowski, 1986) to assess social approach and avoidance motives. The descriptive statistics and internal consistencies of all scales of Study 2 are reported in Table 1.

Manipulation of social acceptance and rejection. The participants were randomly assigned to either the acceptance or the rejection condition. They were instructed to imagine taking part in a study in which they became acquainted with someone of their age and gender within five minutes. The participants in the acceptance condition (n = 116) read the description of a positive social interaction in which the interaction partner was interested and attentive. The participants in the rejection condition (n = 116) read the description of a negative social interaction in which the interaction partner was neither interested nor attentive (see Appendix for a translation of the scenarios). After reading the scenario, the participants responded to open-ended questions regarding the described situation (e.g., "How would you feel after this conversation?").

Manipulation check. In order to test whether the manipulation induced social acceptance and rejection, respectively, we asked the participants to report their feelings after they had read the scenario. Three items each assessed feelings of acceptance (affirmed, liked, accepted) and rejection (ignored, rejected, dismissed). The participants responded on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*) (feelings of acceptance: M = 3.03, SD = 1.97, α = .94; feelings of rejection: M = 2.13, SD = 2.20, α = .96). The two scales were highly correlated (r = -.86, p < .001).

Attributions. As in Study 1, we used an adapted version of the Attributional Pattern Questionnaire for Adults (Poppe et al., 2005) to assess the participants' attributions following the social acceptance or rejection described in the scenario. First, participants wrote down the main

reason for their success or failure in the scenario. For the same reason as in Study 1 we did not analyze these data. Then, the participants' attributions were assessed with two items for each dimension, internality and generality. Subsequently, the items were aggregated into composite indices for each dimension.

Control items. Two control items were used to identify participants who completed the questionnaire without reading the statements properly ("Please respond with 'Does not apply at all,'" "Please respond with 'Applies completely'"). The control items were randomly arranged among other items in the questionnaire. The data of participants who did not respond correctly to at least one of the control items ($N = 17$) were excluded from analysis.

Preliminary analysis

Manipulation check. The manipulation had the expected effect on the participants' feelings of acceptance ($t[230] = 23.77$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.13$) and rejection ($t[230] = -25.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 3.40$). The participants felt more accepted after reading the acceptance scenario ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.00$) than after reading the rejection scenario ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.13$) and they felt less rejected after reading the acceptance scenario ($M = 0.24$, $SD = 0.55$) than after reading the rejection scenario ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.48$).

Results

We tested the association between social motives and attributions for each scenario (acceptance, rejection) separately by running regression analyses (see Table 2). As hypothesized, approach motives predicted the attributions (internality [$\beta = .33$, $p < .01$] and generality [$\beta = .28$, $p < .01$]) reported after participants read the acceptance scenarios, whereas avoidance motives predicted the attributions (internality [$\beta = .37$, $p < .001$] and generality [$\beta = .39$, $p < .001$]) reported after participants read the rejection scenarios. Social approach motives also predicted

the attribution of rejection to general causes ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .01$), which was an unexpected finding. The results thus largely replicated the findings of Study 1.[4]

Study 3

In Study 3, we aimed to replicate the findings of Studies 1 and 2 using actual social interactions involving social acceptance and rejection.

Method

Participants. Participants were recruited from the participant pool at our laboratory, via advertisements on the university campus and senior clubs, and on online platforms of various universities in Switzerland. The sample consisted of $N = 128$ participants (56% men; age range 18-85 years, $M = 47.73$, $SD = 24.34$).[5]

Procedure. After providing informed consent, the participants completed the self-report measures, which assessed social approach and avoidance motives, at home (paper-and-pencil format or online on www.soscisurvey.de). About one week later, the participants came to the laboratory for the social interaction part of the study. They were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate how people communicate with people they do not know. To this end, each participant interacted with two people they did not know. The experimenter led the participant to a room at which the first interaction partner (a confederate) had already arrived. Their task was to get to know each other. Each participant interacted with a confederate of the same gender and age group. In total, there were eight confederates (two young men, two young women, two older men, and two older women). They were all nonprofessional actors and were recruited in nonprofessional theater groups. To ensure standardized behavior on the part of the confederates, they all practiced for the social interaction in a one-day training session. Each participant took part in two separate interactions lasting five minutes each: One interaction involved social acceptance, the other social rejection. In order to control for potential sequence

effects, the participants were randomly assigned to start with either the acceptance or rejection interaction. After each interaction, the participants completed a questionnaire about their experience of the interaction and to which factors they attributed its outcome.[6] All items included in this questionnaire were presented in the same order to each participant. The sessions took 80 minutes on average. After participating, the participants were fully debriefed and received the equivalent of approximately $30 USD in Swiss currency as compensation.

Social approach and avoidance motives. The MAFF and the MSR Scales (Mehrabian, 1970; German version: Sokolowski, 1986) assessed dispositional social approach and avoidance motives. The descriptive statistics of all Study 3 scales are reported in Table 1.

Manipulation of social acceptance and rejection. Social acceptance and rejection were manipulated by means of the confederate's behavior during the interaction (see Nikitin, Schoch, & Freund, 2014). In the social acceptance condition, the confederate demonstrated interest in the participant by displaying verbal and nonverbal signs of attentiveness. The confederate showed interest in what the participant was saying (verbally by saying for example "Oh, this is an interesting hobby!" and nonverbally by being attentive) and often repeated the name of the participant during the interaction (e.g., "XY, what are your hobbies?"). Unpleasant speech pauses were overcome by asking a question (e.g., about the participant's hobbies, place of domicile, profession, grandchildren, etc.). As nonverbal signs of interest, the confederate turned towards the participant, adjusted his or her body language to that of the participant, caught the participant's eyes, and smiled. After the five minutes of the interaction sequence, the confederate said: "Oh, the time is already over? It went fast!" or "It was very nice to get you to know!" depending on what better fit the situation.

In the social rejection condition, the confederate showed initial interest, but became more and more disinterested and inattentive over the course of the interaction. The confederate showed

no or low interest in what the participant was saying (e.g., "Tennis? Not my thing," or giving no commentary at all) and instead talked about his or her own hobbies and interests. If there were commonalities between the confederate and the participant, the confederate did not talk much about them and changed the topic. He or she was inactive, waited long before overcoming speech pauses and then asked a question indicating low interest (e.g., "Sorry, what was your name again?"). In general, the confederate asked impersonal questions or the same question twice. As nonverbal signs of rejection, the confederate folded his/her arms, turned away from the participant, smiled rarely, frowned, and avoided eye contact. After the interaction sequence, the confederate said: "Five minutes can be long" or "We managed it at last" depending on what better fit the situation.

Manipulation check. As a manipulation check, the participants responded to the single item, "Overall, I felt accepted by the other person".[8] Responses were given on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*).

Attributions. An adapted version of the Attributional Pattern Questionnaire for Adults (Poppe et al., 2005) assessed attributions following social acceptance and rejection, respectively. The procedure was the same as in Studies 1 and 2. However, as Study 3 was already very time consuming (80 minutes on average), we were forced to keep the questionnaire as short as possible. Therefore, unlike Studies 1 and 2, each dimension of participant's attributions was assessed with a single item. Supporting this decision, the correlations of the two items of each dimension in Studies 1 and 2 were significant (r = .17 – .67, all ps < .01).

Preliminary analyses

Age differences. Young and older participants did not differ in social approach and avoidance motives, attributions following acceptance to internal and general causes, and attributions following rejection to internal causes (all ps > .17). A significant age difference was

found for attributions following rejection to general causes (young: M = -0.24, SD = 1.45; old: M = 0.28, SD = 1.23; t[124] = -2.19, $p < .05$, d = -0.39).

Sex differences. There were no differences between men and women in any of the study variables (all ps > .16). The internal attribution following rejection differed marginally between men and women (men: M = -0.06, SD = 1.92; women: M = -0.72, SD = 1.79; t[123] = 1.97, p = .05, d = 0.36).

Manipulation check. The manipulation had the expected effect on the experience of the social interaction. The participants felt significantly more accepted in the acceptance condition (M = 4.88, SD = 0.80) than in the rejection condition (M = 3.42, SD = 1.33), t(127) = 11.65, $p <$ .001, d = 2.07. Further, they reported significantly more positive affect in the acceptance condition (M = 4.53, SD = 0.76) than in the rejection condition (M = 4.16, SD = 0.92), t(128) = 7.01, $p < .001$, d = 1.24, and significantly less negative affect in the acceptance condition (M = 1.43, SD = 0.60) than in the rejection condition (M = 1.73, SD = 0.69), t(127) = -5.17, $p < .001$, d = -0.92.

Results

To test the role of social motives in attributions following social acceptance and rejection, we ran the same analyses as in Studies 1 and 2. In line with the hypotheses, social approach motives predicted attributions following acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives predicted attributions following rejection (see Table 2). Social approach motives were positively related to the attribution of social acceptance to general causes (β = .26, $p < .01$), whereas social avoidance motives were positively related to the attribution of social rejection to general causes (β = .23, $p <$ .05). None of the associations between social motives and attribution to internal causes were statistically significant (all ps > .14).[7] Again, the results did not substantially differ when

controlling for age and sex. In addition, neither age nor sex moderated the relationship between social motives and attributions following social acceptance and rejection.

Overall Analyses

In order to obtain a reliable estimate of the associations between social motives and attributions, we aggregated the data of all three studies, resulting in a total sample of $N = 640$ participants. Because the design and procedure of the studies were not identical, we included the studies as control variables (dummy coded: -1 = no participant of Study, 1 = participant of Study). We ran hierarchical regression analyses with the control variables in the first step, and social approach and avoidance motives in the second step, as predictors of attributions following acceptance and rejection, respectively. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 3.

The overall analyses revealed that, across all three studies, social approach motives were positively associated with attributions of acceptance to internality and generality, whereas social avoidance motives were positively related to attributions of rejection to internality and generality. Conversely, social approach motives did not predict attributions following rejection (all ps > .13) and social avoidance motives did not predict attributions following acceptance (all ps > .07). We conclude that, across three studies, social approach motives predicted particularly attributions following social acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives predicted particularly attributions following social rejection.[9]

General Discussion

The present research focused on the question why people differ in the factors to which they attribute social acceptance and rejection. Taking a motivational approach, we examined whether social approach and avoidance motives predict people's attribution patterns.

Overall, this research extends findings of motivation and attribution research. Regarding motivation research, our findings demonstrate that social approach and avoidance motives are independent motivational orientations that differ in their associations with attributions following positive and negative social outcomes, respectively. They are not simply opposite predictors. Regarding attribution research, these studies illustrate that individual differences in motivational orientations are precursors of attributions.

Differential Associations Between Social Approach and Avoidance Motives, and Attributions Following Acceptance and Rejection

These studies demonstrate that dispositional social motives are important predictors of people's attributions following their experiences of social acceptance and rejection. Attesting to the differential effects of approach and avoidance motives, we found that social approach motives were associated with attributions following social acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives were associated with attributions following social rejection. These findings were found across three studies using different methods (i.e., in scenario studies and in actual social interactions involving acceptance or rejection). In general, the present findings are in line with previous research showing that social approach motives are particularly predictive in positive social situations and social avoidance motives particularly predictive in negative social situations (Gable & Poore, 2008; Nikitin et al., 2012; Strachman & Gable, 2006). Thus, social approach motives are related to the positive impact of positive social outcomes, but do not buffer the effects of negative outcomes, whereas social avoidance motives are related to the negative effects of negative social outcomes, but do not affect the experience of positive outcomes. By differentiating the need to belong into social approach motives and social avoidance motives, we can increase our understanding of how people experience social interactions (Gardner, Pickett, &

Brewer, 2000; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). To fully understand social behavior and experience, both motives–approach *and* avoidance–need to be considered.

With respect to attribution research, our findings provide evidence that dispositional motives predict the attribution pattern following positive and negative social outcomes. Thus, people's tendency towards attributing positive social outcomes to internal and general (stable and global) causes, and negative social outcomes to external, variable, and specific causes (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004), is modulated by people's motives. In other words, attributions are not only influenced by the individual history of success and failure, social norms, and rules about the relationships between causes (Weiner, 2000), but also by dispositional motivational orientations. According to Mehrabian (1994), the association between social motives and attributions is driven by the generalized expectations that people have in social situations. People who generally expect to be accepted and liked in social situations will experience a confirmation of their positive expectations by a positive social outcome, whereas people who generally expect to be rejected or disliked in social situations will experience a confirmation of their negative expectations by a negative social outcome. Although previous research has offered many insights about the effect of attributions on expectations (Anderson & Jennings, 1980; Brodt & Zimbardo, 1981; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012), little is known about the effects of expectations on attributions (Alden, 1986). The present findings support the notion that generalized expectations as measured by social approach and avoidance motives play an important role in individual differences in attributions.

Moreover, the present research extends previous findings on self-serving attributions – a tendency for people to make more internal, stable, and global attributions for positive and desired outcomes than for negative and undesired outcomes (Miller & Ross, 1975). Based on the findings of the current studies, we assume that self-serving attributions originate from different

processes in positive and negative situations. Concretely, self-serving attributions in positive situations increase with people's motivation to seek positive social outcomes (i.e., social approach motivation), whereas self-serving attributions in negative situations decrease with people's motivation to avoid negative social outcomes (i.e., social avoidance motivation). This leads to important implications for the alteration of the self-serving bias. In positive situations, self-serving attributions might be enhanced by focusing on positive outcomes, whereas in negative situations the attributions might be more advantageous for maintaining a positive self-view by *not* focusing on the negative outcomes. Experimental studies manipulating motivational focus in different situations are needed to test these conclusions.

Different Dimensions of Attributions

In the present research, we focused on the dimensions of internality and generality separately because we assume that these two dimensions have different meanings (locus of causality and frequency of occurrence, respectively). Our findings suggest that the association between social motives and the extent to which people attribute social outcomes to internal causes is less systematic than the association between social motives and the extent to which they attribute social outcomes to general causes. A theory-based reason for this may be that social approach motives are associated with a positive view of self and others, while social avoidance motives are associated with a negative view of self and others (Nikitin et al., 2012; Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Kang, 2010). Thus, people with strong social approach motives might give not only themselves but also others (although to a lesser extent) credit for the positive outcome of a social interaction. Similarly, people with strong social avoidance motives might blame themselves but also others (although to a lesser extent) for the negative outcome of a social interaction. Internal causes may be less systematically associated with social motives because it is not clear what "internality" means. An internal attribution could refer to effort,

abilities, or personal characteristics. An external attribution could refer to other individuals or to the situation. A methods-based reason for our findings may be that the internality dimension was less reliable than the generality dimension, which consisted of two scales (viz., stability and globality). The low level of reliability of the internality dimension could have reduced the probability to obtain significant results. Future studies need to address potential differential effects of different localizations of attributions, such as an internal locus (attributing the causes of events to oneself), an external-personal locus (attributing the causes of events to the actions of identifiable others), and an external-situational locus (attributing the causes of events to circumstances or chance) (Kinderman & Bentall, 1996). Distinguishing between these three loci might increase the reliability of the attribution scales and provide further insight into attribution processes.

Generalizability of the Findings

A key strength of the present research is the experimental manipulation of social acceptance and rejection that involved actual social interactions. Compared to scenarios with hypothetical feedback consisting of acceptance or rejection, actual interactions are more akin to the kinds of interactions people experience in their daily lives, thus contributing to the external validity of the study.

Note, however, that our studies focused on social interactions with unfamiliar social partners, leaving the question open whether the findings generalize to interactions with familiar social partners or close friends. On the one hand, previous research (e.g., Gable & Impett, 2012; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010) has found similar associations between social motives and behavioral reactions to rejection in close relationships. These associations might be even stronger in close relationships as the experience of acceptance and rejection by people to whom one feels very close might be more self-relevant (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). On the other

hand, the associations between social motives and attributions might be weaker in close relationships, as people have more information and knowledge about the other person and have had the opportunity to observe their own behavior in situations involving their close friend or partner. This information could then directly influence people's attributions and weaken the effect of people's motives on their attributions. Future studies should systematically investigate whether there are substantial differences in the cognitive processes underlying social approach and avoidance motives in familiar versus unfamiliar social contexts.

Moreover, the present research explicitly focused on the *social* domain. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies testing these associations in the areas of achievement or power. It is likely that in these domains achievement and power motives play a stronger role for attributions than social motives. On the basis of the current studies, we would expect to find corresponding results for the associations between achievement approach and avoidance motives and attributions in achievement situations (success vs. failure), as well as for the associations between power approach and avoidance power motives and attributions in power situations (high power vs. low power).

Practical Implications

The present findings suggest, that increasing the strength of social approach motives and decreasing that of social avoidance motives may have positive effects on attributions following social acceptance and rejection. Thus, in order to increase people's social well-being and satisfaction, interventions should target *both* approach and avoidance motives. If interventions only aim to increase the strength of approach motives, the negative effects of negative social situations, such as the experience of ostracism and rejection, cannot be mitigated. Similarly, if interventions only aim to decrease the strength of avoidance motives, people might not be able to

appreciate the positive effects of positive social situations, such as the experience of connectedness, love, and acceptance.

Limitations

In the current research we tried to mimic naturalistic settings of social acceptance and rejection using hypothetical scenarios and actual social interactions. Nevertheless, the present set of studies has several limitations. One limitation concerns the correlational design. Although we manipulated social acceptance and rejection, the findings concerning motives and attributions are correlational and do not allow to draw causal conclusions. Therefore, we cannot rule out that attributions influence social motives. In fact, it is likely that, in the long run, repeated attributions of social rejection to internal and global causes will increase a person‘s social avoidance motives, and that the same attribution pattern of social acceptance will increase a person‘s social approach motives. The two causal directions–motives influence attributions and attributions influence motives–might be both at work. As suggested by Mehrabian and Ksionzky (1974), people's motives might influence their attributions of experienced success and failure, which might then reinforce people's motives. According to this suggestion, people's motives and their associations with attributions should stabilize with age. In line with this suggestion, Nikitin and Freund (2011) found no age-related differences in the association between social avoidance motives and the processing of emotional stimuli in a sample of young and older adults. Similarly, Nikitin et al. (2012) found stability in the effect of social approach and avoidance motives on daily social experiences and behaviors in young and older adults. One way of shedding more light on the causality of the association between motives and attributions is to use intervention studies that target people's motives.

Another issue concerns two unexpected findings in the current research: In Study 1, social avoidance motives were related to general attributions following acceptance and in Study 2,

social approach motives were related to general attributions following rejection. As we did not find these associations systematically across all three studies, we do not want to speculate on their possible meaning. More evidence is needed that attest to the reliability of these results across different samples.

Another limitation concerns the lower effect sizes of Study 3 using actual social interactions compared to Studies 1 and 2 using hypothetical social interactions. A methodological reason for the lower effect sizes in Study 3 may be that each attribution dimension was only assessed with a single item, which makes the scales less reliable and consequently lowers the effect sizes found in Study 3.

Despite these limitations, the current studies provide interesting insights into the interplay of motivation and attribution. One of the strength is the multi-methods approach, using hypothetical scenarios and actual interactions of social acceptance and rejection. Across different methods and samples, whether the data were analyzed with or without control variables, the pattern of findings was fairly robust.

Conclusions

Our findings attest to the relevance of social motives as antecedents of attributions following social acceptance and rejection. Moreover, they demonstrate that social approach and avoidance motives are independent motivational systems that are differentially predictive in positive and negative social situations. Thus, the present research represents a significant contribution to attribution and motivation research. The ability to distinguish between social approach and avoidance motives and their cognitive concomitants and consequences could help us to explain different social behaviors and experiences. In order to enhance positive effects of positive social situations and to reduce negative effects of negative social situations, future research has to take into account both social approach and avoidance motives.

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Footnotes

[1, 5] The samples used for Studies 1 and 3 included younger and older adults because those studies were part of an overarching research project examining age differences between young and older adults with respect to social motives and diverse concomitants. The sample for Study 1 consisted of n = 171 younger (29% men, age range 18-30 years, M = 24.30, SD = 3.42) and n = 109 older adults (58% men, age range 60-84 years, M = 69.31, SD = 5.72).

The sample for Study 3 consisted of n = 63 younger (59% men; age range 18-33 years, M = 23.65, SD = 3.56) and n = 65 older adults (52% men; age range 61-85 years, M = 71.08, SD = 6.26).

[2] There were no significant differences between attributions following the first and the second acceptance scenario (all ps > .34). Attributions following the rejection scenarios, however, differed significantly between the first and the second scenario (internal attribution first scenario: M = -0.21, SD = 1.46; internal attribution second scenario: M = 0.57, SD = 1.66, t[275] = -6.33, p < .001, d = -0.76; general attribution first scenario: M = -0.29, SD = 1.16; general attribution second scenario: M = 0.25, SD = 1.30, t[275] = -3.83, p < .001, d = -0.46).

[3, 4, 7] We ran the same analyses separately for the attribution dimensions of stability and globality. The results concerning stability, globality, and generality did not differ systematically. We thus report the findings for the combined dimension of generality.

[6] There were no significant differences between most attributions with regard to the order of acceptance and rejection interaction (1 = first position, 2 = second position) (all ps > .65). The attribution following the rejection interaction to internal causes however, significantly differed between the position of the acceptance and rejection interaction (first position of social rejection: M = -0.03, SD = 1.94; second position of social rejection: M = 0.70, SD = 1,74, t[125] = 2.06, p < .05, d = 0.37). Therefore, we ran the analyses described in the results part of Study 3 controlling

for the order of the acceptance and rejection condition. As these results did not differ systematically form the results without the control variable, we only report the findings without the control variables in the result section.

[8] In contrast to Study 2, we assessed only feelings of acceptance after the manipulation and did not assess feelings of rejection. This decision was based on the high correlation of the two items in Study 2 ($r = -.86, p < .001$), indicating that they are the two poles of one scale. High values on the manipulation check indicate high feelings acceptance, whereas low values indicate high feelings of rejection.

[9] In the second step of the regression analysis, we entered the interactions between social motives and each study. As only one of the sixteen interactions was statistically significant, these interactions will not be interpreted further.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency (Cronbach's α) for Studies 1-3

	Study 1			Study 2			Study 3		
Variable	*M*	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α
Social motives									
Approach motives	3.61	0.63	.75	3.40	0.66	.79	3.44	0.60	.73
Avoidance motives	2.99	0.72	.80	3.12	0.74	.84	2.95	0.65	.77
Acceptance scenarios: Attribution to									
Internal causes	0.44	0.98	.56	-0.07	0.99	.48	0.22	1.86	-
General causes	0.82	1.00	.78	0.23	1.01	.64	0.64	1.42	-
Rejection scenarios: Attribution to									
Internal causes	0.17	1.19	.61	-1.12	1.25	.77	-0.35	1.87	-
General causes	-0.14	1.03	.76	-0.88	1.12	.69	0.03	1.36	-

Table 2

Regression of Attributions Following Social Acceptance and Rejection, Respectively, on Social Motives (Studies 1-3)

	Study 1				Study 2				Study 3			
	Attributions following acceptance		Attributions following rejection		Attributions following acceptance		Attributions following rejection		Attributions following acceptance		Attributions following rejection	
Predictor	Internal	General	Internal	General	Internal	General	Internal	General	Internal	General	Internal	General
R^2	.01	.07***	.07***	.09***	.14***	.08**	.16***	.26***	.02	.05*	.02	.04*
Approach motives	.10	.21**	-.07	-.06	.33**	.28**	-.08	-.23**	.18	.26**	.08	.08
Avoidance motives	-.04	-.15*	.25***	.28***	-.13	-.07	.37***	.39***	.06	.02	.17	.23*

Note. The results represent standardized regression coefficients. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression of Attributions Following Social Acceptance and Rejection on Study and Social Motives (Studies 1-3)

	Attributions following acceptance		Attributions following rejection	
Predictor	Internal	General	Internal	General
Step 1 (Control variables) (R^2)	.02**	.04***	.12***	.08***
Step 2 (R^2)	.05**	.10***	.17***	.17***
Approach motives	.16***	.23***	-.03	-.06
Avoidance motives	-.02	-.08	.23***	.29***

Note. The values represent standardized regression coefficients. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. Control variables were Studies 1, 2 and 3 (dummy coded: -1 = no participant of Study, 1 = participant of Study).

Appendix

Acceptance condition (Study 2). Imagine that you are invited to participate in a study in which you are to become acquainted with someone of same age and gender within five minutes. As your interaction partner does not initiate the conversation, you start by introducing yourself. After exchanging a few words, the conversation gets more and more lively. Your interaction partner maintains eye contact with you, listens attentively, and seems to show interest in you. It is easy to find common interests. The conversation is very spirited and your interaction partner seems to find the topics discussed interesting. At the end, your interaction partner says: "Wow, that went by fast!" You feel accepted.

Rejection condition (Study 2). Imagine that you are invited to participate in a study in which you are to become acquainted with someone of same age and gender within five minutes. As your interaction partner does not initiate the conversation, you start by introducing yourself. After exchanging a few words, the conversation stops. Your interaction partner rarely looks at you, does not listen attentively to you, and seems to lack interest in you. You try to come up with new topics in order to find common ground, but the conversation continues to move slowly. Your interaction partner does not seem to find the topics discussed interesting. At the end, your interaction partner says: "Wow, that took forever!" You feel rejected.